



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on National Defence

NDDN

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NUMBER 010

•

2nd SESSION

•

39th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, February 5, 2008

—

Chair

Mr. Rick Casson

Also available on the Parliament of Canada Web Site at the following address:

<http://www.parl.gc.ca>

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Rick Casson (Lethbridge, CPC)): We'll call the meeting to order.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have a two-part meeting. The first part is the regular briefings on Afghanistan and Canada's involvement there. Today we have General Atkinson with us. He's the director of general operations with the Strategic Joint Staff. Then after his presentation and one round of questions we'll deal with committee business. I want to talk about our upcoming hearings and witness lists and some issues like that.

General, the floor is yours. You've been here before. You know the process. We'll let you take what time you need to bring us up-to-date, and then we'll open it up for a round of questions, one time allotment for each party. Go ahead.

Brigadier-General P. Atkinson (Director General Operations, Strategic Joint Staff, Department of National Defence): Thank you very much, and thank you for inviting me back. As I said when I came the first time before Christmas, these briefings are very important for everyone to have an understanding of what's going on. I am happy to be able to provide an update to the committee here today.

My presentation today is based primarily on reportable security issues from November to January 2008, updating what I have done previously. I'm prepared to follow my presentation with any clarification or answers to questions as appropriate. I'd like to begin with a short explanation about operational security and its relation to our mission in Afghanistan.

Our operations in Afghanistan have generated a growing public interest for information. This appetite for information about the Government of Canada operations serves positive and lawful objectives required of a parliamentary democracy. Unfortunately, significant amounts of the information requested are operationally sensitive, and its release could prejudice the success of Canadian Forces' operations and endanger the lives of our soldiers, members of the whole-of-government team, and the Afghans with whom we work. Canadians expect the department and the Canadian Forces to protect the security of Canadian troops who are in harm's way and to mitigate the risks they face as much as possible.

We recognize the importance of providing the information to the public and work hard to meet those obligations within the limits of the law. There must, however, be a balance between our responsibilities to make information available to the public and our responsibility to protect the lives of our men and women in

uniform. The safeguarding of some information specific to the mission in Afghanistan is fundamental to the safety of all Canadians working in Afghanistan and the coalition personnel with whom we work side by side each and every day.

Over the past months, there have been a number of operations conducted, with ISAF forces, the Afghan National Army, and the Afghan National Police each playing an important role. The operations were very successful in improving the mobility of the security forces and contributing to the level of stability in our area of responsibility, and consequently extending the reach of the Afghan government further throughout their territory.

Our approach in Afghanistan is a whole-of-government team effort based on the three pillars of governance, development, and security, in that each pillar affects the others in a dynamic interaction. Security enables development; effective governance enhances security; and development creates opportunities and multiplies the rewards of improved security and good governance. In this circle of cause and effect, security is an essential condition of good governance and lasting development. Joint Task Force Afghanistan has completed a number of development projects, which I'll also discuss in my presentation.

I would caution in these introductory remarks that although we're achieving success, Afghans still need our support and presence because they have not achieved the required level of self-sustainment yet.

[Translation]

Since February 4, 2007, the United States has directed the headquarters of the International Security Assistance Force, under the direction of General Dan McNeill. The next commander appointed will also be an American, General McKiernan. He's currently in Europe, in Heidelberg. The date of the change of command has not yet been confirmed.

An overview of the countries taking part in the International Security Assistance Force mission will make it possible to put international efforts in this area in context. The strength of the International Security Assistance Force is approximately 42,000 soldiers from 39 different countries, including 26 NATO member countries.

[English]

In Regional Command South, the main effort is providing security of the region by disrupting the insurgents and thus setting the conditions for further development, particularly in Kandahar City and the Kandahar Afghan development zone, which extends all the way over to the Pakistan border. This slide shows the Regional Command South, and it depicts the lead nation in each of the provinces. It's important to note that a Canadian army general officer, Major-General Marc Lessard, now commands Regional Command South, a NATO command. He took over just this past weekend.

General Lessard commands approximately 11,600 soldiers, including four provincial reconstruction teams. This represents an incredible opportunity for both him and for the Canadian Forces to play a visible leadership role in what is Canada's highest foreign policy priority right now.

I like to call this next little section "the enemy has a vote". So that there's no confusion when I say "the enemy has a vote", the enemy has a say in what's going on in Afghanistan, and I'll explain further. Insurgents have continued their attempts to disrupt, to frustrate, and to destroy the process of establishing peace and security in Afghanistan. However, they have achieved only limited success to date.

During the reporting period, RC South has continued to see high levels of insurgent activity. Insurgents have largely limited their operations to asymmetric tactics like the use of IEDs. We recognize that the central Government of Afghanistan has made significant progress over the last six years, but their lack of influence and authority outside of major district centres continues to contribute to the ability of the Taliban as they attempt to expand their influence.

As President Karzai put it to our Prime Minister when he visited here, in Afghanistan they are trying to accomplish in five years what we in Canada have done in 100 years. They're in a hurry, and they need the kind of help that we can give them.

The insurgents' last low-scale conventional operation was conducted this past November, in the Arghandab district of Kandahar province. A Taliban attempt to establish a foothold to the northeast of the city was defeated by Afghan forces supported by ISAF. Note that I said "defeated by Afghan forces supported by ISAF", and not the other way around.

In response, the insurgents continue to target the Afghan police, whom they consider to be a soft target. On November 23, they attacked and killed seven policemen and overran their checkpoint. But fewer direct engagements against ISAF and Afghan national security forces have occurred as the Taliban continue to suffer heavy losses any time they engage directly. They have, however, continued to employ IEDs and indirect fire in an increasing effort to achieve some success against the pro-government forces. In many incidents the insurgents have increased the risk to the civilian population by hiding among them, operating from civilian dwellings, and using civilians as human shields.

The Taliban have used children and other innocent Afghans to discourage ISAF operations. They will attempt to exploit any opportunity to discredit the Government of Afghanistan, or ISAF,

and will continue to attempt to intimidate the local population through using propaganda, executing those they identify as traitors, and attacking police stations and government district centres. The use of these tactics is a reaction to the successful operations by pro-government forces over the past few months.

I draw your attention to the map on the board. ISAF produced this map, and it took them over two years to put all the information together, because it's something that's obviously very complex and growing. It shows the real security problem areas in red. Those red areas are only 10% of the country's districts, and 70% of the violence in Afghanistan occurred in those red areas.

The dark green areas represent 31% of the districts in Afghanistan. In 2007 there was no hostile activity in those areas, and 30% of the country's main roads were free of violent acts as well.

The light green areas represent 44% of the districts in Afghanistan. Those areas saw no more than one hostile event per quarter for every 10,000 people living in those districts. Fewer than half—47%—of the main roads in those districts have less than one hostile event per month.

The yellow areas represent 15% of the districts in Afghanistan. Those areas saw no more than one hostile event per month for every 10,000 people living in those districts. Fewer than one-quarter—23%—of the main roads in those districts had more than one hostile event per month.

● (1540)

Only 10% of the districts in Afghanistan had more than a dozen hostile events per month per 10,000 inhabitants. Granted, 70% of the violence in those areas we've already mentioned.

So there are about 40 problem districts in total. Of those districts, 19 have populations of less than 20,000 people, and the total population of those 40 problem districts is less than 6% of the total population of Afghanistan.

So even though in 2006 and 2007 violence increased in the problem districts, the situation overall in Afghanistan is calmer. Stats for 2006 and 2007 tell us that the insurgency is not spreading across the country, as has been stated in some reports that we have read.

With regard to Regional Command South, 5 of those 40 problem districts are in our area, which is why we have from time to time a pretty hot go of it. Let me assure you that Joint Task Force Afghanistan is concentrating its forces in those areas and we are progressing well, mainly because of our combined efforts with the Afghan national security forces.

● (1545)

[Translation]

Our mission in Afghanistan is to conduct military operations in the area of operation assigned to us, to assist the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in establishing and ensuring a safe environment with the full support of the Afghan National Security Force, so as to enhance the government's authority and influence and thus to promote Afghan development and regional stability.

Since my first appearance, Joint Task Force Afghanistan has conducted a number of missions in Zhari, Panjwayi and Arghandab districts. Those missions benefited from the success of the missions conducted in September and October 2007. During those missions, members of the International Security Assistance Force, the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police combined their efforts to establish strong points and police sub-stations. Their efforts have made it possible to exercise better control in the Zhari region and greater controls in the Panjwayi region. As a result, we are in a better position to prevent insurgents from moving freely in the major centres of the districts and, in so doing, to reduce the number of incidents.

The most remarkable improvement is that members of the Afghan National Security Force are now responsible and more capable than previously of securing these new strong points. Consequently, the Joint Task Force Afghanistan can expand the security bubble and the Afghan development zone.

[English]

In November, the Afghan National Army completed a number of operations to increase security in the Zhari district of Kandahar province. This operation was executed by the Afghan National Army, working with our Joint Task Force Afghanistan and other elements of the NATO-led international security force. The intent was to drive the insurgents out of the territory surrounding an important crossroads in the Zhari district and to establish a strongpoint; in other words, a fortified compound from which the Afghan national security forces would both control the crossroads and maintain peace in the area, as we'd done in other locations in October. But in this case, they were doing the business.

The operation's first kinetic phase, which was a ground assault, took the insurgents completely by surprise. With no time to mount an organized response, the insurgents were compelled to withdraw after a short but intense firefight. On the night before the assault, the soldiers of the 3rd Battalion of the Royal 22nd battle group and elements of two Afghan National Army *kandaks*, or battalions, infiltrated the area around the crossroads.

This battle was the second joint land operation conducted by the Afghan National Army, from the initial planning stages all the way through to successful completion, and it was the first that involved more than one *kandak* in the same operation.

Canadian artillery and ISAF tactical aircraft were also engaged in the battle, ensuring that the Canadian and Afghan ground troops could not only secure the objective but also open a supply route to permit the construction of the strongpoint. As soon as that objective was secured, the 3rd Battalion of the 22nd battle group engineering

squadron began building the strongpoint. The project took seven days.

Taking territory from the insurgents and building a strongpoint on it from which the Afghan forces will control the area is only part of our overall strategy to set the stage for a lasting security environment in that Canadian area of operation. As we train more ANA troops and position them over a larger territory, we will leave the insurgents with fewer areas to operate in and move about.

As a follow-on, Joint Task Force Afghanistan has conducted similar operations in three different locations within the Panjwai district. Those operations, either led by Joint Task Force Afghanistan or by the Afghan National Army, are good examples of the Afghan National Army's ability, capability, and continued growth.

While success in Afghanistan can only be measured over a long period, the success of these recent operations has increased the stability and security throughout that Zhari-Panjwai area, resulting in a good progression for the Government of Canada's governance and development objectives there.

The Afghan National Army's development into a capable and competent fighting force continues. There are marked improvements in their ability to plan operations, and their significant gains in their ability to undertake operations are evidence of their steady and positive growth.

Afghan National Army combat units continue to improve, with over half of them—these are the ones working with us—being considered capable of performing counter-insurgency operations with external support. Collective combat skills also continue to improve; however, work still remains to be done in the training of headquarters and the support units in order for the Afghan National Army to eventually achieve a true, independent capability.

We currently have operational mentor and liaison teams working with three infantry *kandaks*, or infantry battalions, which are each the equivalent size of one of our battalions: one with the combat service support unit and one at the brigade headquarters in Kandahar province. In fact, Canada has had a direct impact on the training and development of the growth of a professional and credible army, which is now at more than 41,500. At any one time, we're training and mentoring 2,000 soldiers with our operational mentoring and liaison teams.

With members in every province in every district, the Afghan National Police are often the most visible face of the Afghan government to its people. Canada is utilizing an integrated approach to police reform that focuses on four areas: one, training and mentoring; two, infrastructure and equipment; three, coordination; and four, police salary support. The Afghan National Police reform is a major challenge, but it is ultimately critical to promoting long-term stability and the rule of law in Afghanistan.

●(1550)

[Translation]

The Canadian Armed Forces, together with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Correctional Service of Canada are committed to the success of this reform.

In addition, the Canadian Armed Forces, together with their supervision and liaison teams, are working to improve the capacity of the National Afghan Police in the Kandahar region. These teams supervise Afghan police activities around the clock in order to teach Afghan police officers the essential survival qualifications that will enable them to operate and survive in an unstable security environment.

To date, approximately 615 Afghan police officers have received this training. These tactical successes of recent months are a clear indication that our current mandate to increase the capability of security forces is working well.

[English]

In general, progress has been made on all fronts and in areas where it counts, such as Kandahar City and the Zhari-Panjwai district, a view expressed by the population in surveys and in the Afghan national security force capacity-building.

We have set the conditions to deepen and broaden security governance and development in areas where 90% of the population of Kandahar lives. However, this is tempered by the give-and-take nature of the environment. For example, the ISAF presence in Zhari-Panjwai has disrupted the insurgent influence in that area. To counter this, the insurgents have conducted attacks in surrounding districts in an attempt to distract ISAF from its efforts in Zhari and Panjwai. So while progress is being made in Zhari-Panjwai, violence may rise in other areas, but this cannot cloud an appreciation for significant strides that have been made since last year.

The following are some concrete examples of the progress.

A poll conducted for several major news media organizations—ABC News, ARD, and the BBC—indicates that a vast majority of Afghans approve of the ISAF and U.S.-led coalition presence in the country. Specifically, 72% of the respondents approve of the coalition presence, 67% support the ISAF presence, 68% said that the international troops are doing a good job, a full 92% of Afghans are opposed or strongly opposed to the Taliban, 75% of those polled said the attacks against ISAF and coalition forces are completely unjustified, whereas jihadi fighters from other countries are opposed by 83% of the respondents. So this poll and others previously released clearly show that the Afghan people are behind our efforts, as we work to assist the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to rebuild the country after so many years of conflict.

Joint district coordination centres have been established in Zhari-Panjwai and in Spin Buldak.

[Translation]

With a concept put forward by a number of stakeholders, including Battle Group Headquarters, the Joint District Coordination Centre is establishing itself by making the population aware of the merits of this service. For example, the Joint District Coordination

Centre can quickly establish a rapid response team consisting of a mix of Afghan police officers and members of the Afghan National Army, depending on available resources, instead of waiting for coalition forces.

In the lefthand corner of the slide, you can see Captain Guy Noury of the civilian-military cooperation team of the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team speaking with Zhari district villagers to explain the concept of the Joint District Coordination Centre to them.

●(1555)

[English]

In this slide, we see Canadian representatives attending a shura in the Afghan district north of Kandahar City as a show of support to the newly appointed district leader, Kareemullah Naqibi. Community leaders from across the district attended the shura, where they not only expressed their concern about security but also sought assistance with road construction, the installation of electricity, and flood prevention. Corruption is being recognized and reported more often now by the locals, and 10 of 17 districts now have elected community development councils.

With Canada's assistance and through the Kandahar provincial reconstruction team, Kandahar University once again has access to locally sourced well water. The work that began back in June of 2007 has seen numerous technical setbacks and was completed just before Christmas.

Originally the university had a well. However, a broken pump and subsequent collapse of the original well forced them to truck in water at great expense to supply their needs. The completion of this new well will permit the university to focus its funds on education rather than on having to pay for water to sustain its 1,300 students. The joint effort by our CIMIC team and the specialist engineering team at Camp Nathan Smith helped to improve the quality of life for those Kandahar University students and faculty. In this slide, you see two members of the engineering team performing their final inspection of the well installation as they turn it on.

Early in 2007, the PRT civilian-military cooperation team visited the farming village of Kharut in the northern Panjwai district southwest of Kandahar. They found the community cut in half by an irrigation canal. That little picture you see is the canal that cut the town in half. You can see the rudimentary bridge they had put in place. This was not only inconvenient and risky for the builders, but it was a security problem, as only part of the village south of the canal was easily accessible to police vehicles.

After consultations with the village leaders and a local detachment of the Afghan National Police, Joint Task Force Afghanistan decided to design the new bridge, and hired a local contractor to provide the site supervisors and the key tradesmen from Kandahar City.

As you can see in the slide, the bridge is reinforced concrete on a stone masonry foundation. With almost all of the work being done by hand, the bridge was completed in about a month. The total project cost about \$20,000 Canadian.

The new bridge was completed in December. It now allows the farmers to travel safely between the village and their fields, and it allows the Afghan National Police detachment to patrol the entire village and its outlying areas. The irrigation canal does its job and the crops are growing. The village elders are satisfied.

Next is Operation Causeway, which you would have seen in the news when this broke in early January.

[Translation]

The causeway that you see on screen was opened on January 8. We've built a gravel surface on this causeway, which consists of 175 concrete culverts laid against each other on the bed of three rivers. The causeway will link Highways 1 and 4 and will encourage the local economy and help the population.

As regards security, it will be easier for the Provincial Reconstruction Team, the Brigade Group, the Afghan National Security Force and the Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team advisor to provide a security presence across Kandahar province. The project provided employment for more than 50 Afghans for approximately three months. This passage over the Arghandab River will improve travel between two major towns, for security and economic development purposes.

[English]

I crossed that river at the site where the causeway was put in, both when it was a dry bed in the summer and there was nothing there and also at Christmastime, a year ago, when the river was high. When the river was high and in the flood zone, nothing but the heaviest vehicles could make it across. In effect, we had a drought there for seven years, and when the rains came, the towns were cut off. There was a period of almost six to eight weeks where you could not get across unless you had a heavy vehicle such as a tank—a real heavy vehicle. If they tried it with their carts, small trucks, and cars, they would just get swept away. This causeway has made a huge difference to the lives of these Afghans in that area.

The Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police have begun to plan and conduct their own operations—I mentioned this earlier. The establishment of police substations and strongpoints have created nascent progress in the Afghan National Police capacity, consequently helping us to increase the security zone.

With a current strength of 75,500 personnel, the Afghan National Police requires more police mentor teams, which are an essential element in achieving success. Joint Task Force Afghanistan welcomes the focused district development program that the Combined Security Transition Command—Afghanistan has developed. That's the American-led command that plans the development for both the ANA and the ANP. The program aims at enhancing Afghan National Police capabilities and transferring that police force into a service that is loyal to their people and to Afghan national interests.

During a recent visit to Afghanistan, Lieutenant-General Mike Gauthier, the commander of our Canadian Expeditionary Force Command, presented a ceremonial C7 rifle to Colonel Abdul Basir to symbolize Canada's donation to the Afghan National Army. We provided the ANA with 2,500 C7 rifles, ammunition, and training, which will improve the long-term security capability and help with

their stabilization efforts in Kandahar province, as the AK-47s they were using are older, heavier, and less accurate than our Canadian C7 rifles.

Working with our government partners—Foreign Affairs, CIDA, CSC, and the RCMP—as well as ANA and ANP, Joint Task Force Afghanistan maintains its focus on improving joint planning and execution as well as inter-agency coordination with our Afghan allies. But the mission is not without its challenges, and this is what I want to finish with.

Notwithstanding the efforts in improving the security situation in the Zhari and Panjwai districts, non-government organization efforts towards development and reconstruction continue to be delayed in some areas of our responsibility due to the insurgent threat.

The security situation should improve as the newly built police substations increase their area of operation and their effectiveness. We have seen a significant increase in our security footprint since the month of October. As noted earlier, Joint Task Force Afghanistan and the Afghan national security forces have built and manned eight new police substations and several checkpoints.

The Afghan national security forces have allowed us to move into unsecured areas, to set the conditions for success in leaving behind a capable Afghan force mentored by small police mentoring teams. In order to continue this security area expansion, we need more Afghan national security forces allocated to our area of operation.

Very good news for Regional Command South was the announcement by the U.S. of 3,200 marines heading to southern Afghanistan for an assignment this spring. It is evident that increasing the number of soldiers by more than 25% will significantly boost ISAF force projection in Regional Command South.

● (1600)

[Translation]

The Afghan National Police pay system and the lack of equipment still undermine the effectiveness of Afghan police. Joint Task Force Afghanistan is still working with the Afghan government to resolve the situation. It is important to note that the strength and capacity of the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police Force are increasing day by day. Three years ago, there was no Afghan National Army. Today, it has nearly 42,000 members, including a large number conducting operations alongside the International Security Assistance Force. The Afghan National Police Force is now considered a force that is growing day by day. It is an essential factor in the expansion of our security zone.

We must be able to communicate our achievements more effectively to Canadians and Afghans, particularly in the areas of reconstruction and development. This is a major challenge because the media tend to focus more on security issues to the detriment of reconstruction and development, as a result of which too much importance is attached to security and there is thus a misperception of the actual security situation. We are striving to improve our communications in Afghanistan. Joint Task Force Afghanistan is working with the embedded media to set up a workshop to make the Afghan media more professional. The training session will be given on site in early February.

As you know, the Taliban will still be trying to spread this information among the local population and will still conduct disinformation operations in order to downplay our successes.

• (1605)

[English]

I'd like to conclude my presentation with these four quick points.

We are improving security by supporting democracy and democratic values in Afghanistan. We are improving security by enhancing the legitimate government's capacity to rule justly and effectively. We're defeating the Taliban by fostering economic and social development, and we're defeating the Taliban by building Afghan security forces so that Afghans can defend their government and their citizens from violent extremists.

Thank you very much. I will take any questions you have.

The Chair: Thank you very much, General. We'll do that.

We'll go to our usual one round. Seven minutes is our usual time. That'll put us into a half hour, and then we'll have some time left to do our other business.

Mr. Coderre.

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Atkinson, I'm going to ask you some fairly brief questions, which will require some rather brief answers.

[English]

Are you ready, sir?

[Translation]

Last October, the number of Canadian wounded was 565, I believe. How many are there today?

[English]

BGen P. Atkinson: As you know, for operational security up to this point in time, we have not provided individual statistics related to a month or any particular period of time, but we constantly look at and reassess the operational security on the ground. And we have recently—in the past days—made a decision to release the casualty statistics on an annual basis.

I can provide you, here today, the statistics for 2007, and I can have provided to the committee the full laydown from 2002 through 2007 when we're finished here today.

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre: General Atkinson, we don't have the same definition of the term "security". Today you announced there were two minor casualties, and we are pleased that they were not more serious, but, for reasons of transparency, I don't see why you couldn't forward that kind of information to us. I'm a bit disappointed, once again. The fact that we can't obtain this kind of answer shows a lack of transparency, in my view.

Furthermore, every time there are rotations, there is decompression. Have you noticed a resurgence in health problems, particularly mental health problems, among our troops? Our soldiers are on the front line, and this is a combat mission. Major health problems were observed in Iraq. In the case of Afghanistan, are the Canadians having more trouble, particularly with regard to post-traumatic stress syndrome?

[English]

BGen P. Atkinson: I believe General Semianiwi, the chief of military personnel, is coming before the committee in a couple of days. That is directly down his lane. He will be able to speak effectively towards the issue.

As for the site, which as you know has been set up and running, and this is our third rotation, I don't believe we've seen an increase. He will be able to speak specifically to that. What I can say about the response from our soldiers about going through the decompression site on the way home is that this is very helpful to them. They have an opportunity to talk amongst each other, to talk about things they've seen, issues they've faced. It better prepares them to come home and reintegrate with their families and with society writ large.

It is also the point where, if there are issues, that's where we identify them. General Semianiwi will be able to cover that for you.

Hon. Denis Coderre: Fair enough, thank you.

Since the Prime Minister has said it's up to you guys to answer our questions, I'd like to simply ask you this. Why did we stop the transfer of detainees?

• (1610)

BGen P. Atkinson: This is the situation on the ground, and there's no secret from anyone because it's out on the public record. On November 5 there was a circumstance that gave the operational commander on the ground, General Laroche, a concern. We temporarily suspended the transfer of detainees. When the conditions re-establish themselves, then we will recommence.

The details of that are not something I want to get into because it could prejudice what we're doing on the ground.

Hon. Denis Coderre: So it's okay to have answers from the Dutch, from the Americans, from the others, but in our case there's a problem. Is that what you're telling me?

BGen P. Atkinson: I anticipated we would enter into this area of questioning, and I prepared some thoughts, which I'd like to share and which I think will be useful to this discussion, if that's all right with you.

Hon. Denis Coderre: Yes.

BGen P. Atkinson: Providing the Taliban with operational information on detainees would only serve to support their efforts, which would jeopardize the safety of our troops operating in Afghanistan. In assessing the possible harm that could result from the release of information, the Canadian Forces carefully assesses what I call the mosaic effect, meaning that information cannot be viewed in isolation.

In the hands of an informed reader, unrelated pieces of information, which may not in and of themselves be sensitive, form together to create a very comprehensive picture. This is analogous to a road map, which very clearly shows you not only the start point but also the destination and each turn in the road and every critical junction, which allows you to view each of these segments of the map independently. They might not be considered vital, but as you learn each of these pieces of information and you fit them together, soon you have the entire map outlining the critical points that can be affected, thereby derailing the entire course of action and preventing you from reaching your destination.

Mr. John Cannis (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chairman. With all due respect, it's not every day we have this. For me, this is an entire presentation. There are a lot of generalities, and we're not getting the benefit of a question and a response, with all due respect.

The Chair: Sir, how much—

BGen P. Atkinson: I've read half of what I intended to read.

Hon. Denis Coderre: Would it be possible to have a copy of that text, please?

BGen P. Atkinson: Yes, it will. Can I finish?

The Chair: Go ahead. I'll be lenient on your time, sir.

BGen P. Atkinson: In the case of detainees, if we released information about their identities, it could not only put them in danger, it could also jeopardize their family or associates and may result in a death or cause them to be used for counter-intelligence against NATO operations.

As the CDS said on Friday, the Taliban put a huge amount of effort into finding out where their people have gone if they've disappeared. They don't know whether they've been killed; they don't know whether they've been detained. They don't know, when they show back up, whether they've simply been released because of a lack of evidence or if it's because they've turned and are reporting to us. They don't know whether they're giving us information and when they've been detained. They put an enormous amount of effort into activities, we know, to try to determine all of those things.

At the same time, they find it very difficult to peel back what happened and look at our tactics, and therefore to make us more predictable to them and therefore increase the risk to our soldiers. This is the operational security aspect of it. It causes the Taliban great difficulty. We're comfortable with it because we have a responsibility to our soldiers and their families.

Hon. Denis Coderre: Again, with a lot of respect, I would suggest that maybe we should talk more to other countries because they're providing us with more details. I think there's a limit between telling us exactly where they are and providing us with some

statistics on some issues, saying how many detainees, for example, and all that.

I defer totally on that, Mr. Chair, because it's not my definition of operational....

The last question for my—

BGen P. Atkinson: Mr. Chairman, I can answer a little more to that, if you'd like.

Hon. Denis Coderre: It's okay now. We have enough.

The Chair: Mr. Cannis, you have three minutes.

Mr. John Cannis: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'm going to ask some questions that are being asked of us back home in our ridings. Is what they're seeing on television Afghanistan as a whole? They're seeing a home that's demolished, a street that doesn't exist, young boys and girls walking around.... Is this Afghanistan?

BGen P. Atkinson: This is absolutely Afghanistan. This is where Canada is working in Kandahar province, where our Joint Task Force Afghanistan operates.

Mr. John Cannis: So this is really that area. That's what I want to pass on to my constituents.

BGen P. Atkinson: Absolutely.

Mr. John Cannis: So I can tell my constituents Afghanistan has elevators, a telephone system, a banking system, an infrastructure. But this is just one area. Is that the message I can give them?

• (1615)

BGen P. Atkinson: In major urban centres there's electricity, elevators, functioning telephone systems, a nascent banking system.

Mr. John Cannis: And President Karzai's assistant lives in one of those little huts.

BGen P. Atkinson: But there are also areas of Afghanistan that are very rural and very primitive. We have a mix of both.

Mr. John Cannis: Okay, I've got the idea.

Sir, you talked about needing more Afghan national guardsmen. We all agree. How is that recruiting coming along? We were told in the past—and it keeps coming back—that we keep trying to recruit them, jeopardizing our people's lives. How is that recruiting coming along? How effective is it? We're hearing that they're being paid, say, \$50 a month, and then the drug lords, the warlords, are recruiting them on the side and paying them two and three times as much. Are they being enticed? We've also heard rumours that by day they're doing this and by night they're doing that. How is that coming along, the recruiting aspect, and how are we recruiting them?

BGen P. Atkinson: The Afghanistan Compact set a goal of having a regular army of 70,000 soldiers. As I mentioned in my remarks today, they have recruited 41,500.

Not all those are fully trained. In the area we're working in we now have three *kandaks*, a service support unit, and a brigade headquarters working with us. They are moving along well. We would like to have more, but it takes time to train them. You give them basic training, but then you need to train them as combat teams, you need to give them experience, you need to have them working in joint operations with each other and with the international forces. It takes time to build that capability, but they are showing progress, and we are very happy with their progress to date. However, it's not there yet.

The Chair: Mr. Bachand.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'd like to go back to the detainee question. You read us a paper earlier, and I'd like to know whether that's the staff position or that of the civilian authorities to which you normally report. In other words, is that a position that the government told you to adopt or one that you adopted yourself and subsequently transmitted to the government?

[English]

BGen P. Atkinson: That position is a military position. Operational security is a military responsibility for the Chief of Defence Staff, for me as the director general of operations, and for our troops on the ground. Operational security is something I deal with every day. I have a responsibility, as I look at information that has been requested through the Access to Information Act, to make sure I safeguard information that could negatively affect our operations on the ground. The description I gave you of operational security is mine. To amplify, I quoted a little from the remarks the CDS gave to the press on Friday. I thought the analogy of a roadmap was a good descriptor of operational security. It is a purely military responsibility and one that we hold dear because it involves the lives of our soldiers.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: If the civilian authorities, that is to say the government, told you to state specifically in future the number of persons you are detaining and the place where they are located, what would be the staff response?

[English]

BGen P. Atkinson: Mr. Bachand, you're asking me a political question.

We have the responsibility for the OPSEC and detainees. We're responsible for when we take them and for processing them in accordance with our SOPs, and the Department of Foreign Affairs, in accordance with our supplementary arrangement with the Afghan government, is responsible for the piece after that.

The question you're asking me is what the military's response would be, so it is a hypothetical question, and I think it is a question that is unfair for you to ask me.

Mr. Claude Bachand: Unfair for me to ask you?

[Translation]

Mr. Chairman, as members, I think we have a right to ask witnesses the questions we want to ask. Do you agree with what the general has just said, that I shouldn't ask these kinds of questions because they aren't appropriate?

• (1620)

[English]

The Chair: We can ask any question we wish, but I think the general is under some pretty...the word isn't "constraints", but he's under some obligation to answer military questions here. It's a military briefing. I do agree with his response that it seemed to be a political question that would be best asked of his political masters. So I agree with his response.

[Translation]

BGen P. Atkinson: Mr. Bachand, the Prime Minister explained on Friday that the Chief of Staff, General Hillier, and the Canadian Armed Forces were responsible for operations concerning detainees. These matters are our responsibility.

Mr. Claude Bachand: Since they represent civilian authority and grant mandates, members are responsible for ensuring that a fair balance is struck. You have to agree that you only have to answer the kinds of questions we ask you. I can't answer them. You shouldn't pass judgments on the questions we ask, because they are important.

Do you agree with me on that?

[English]

BGen P. Atkinson: Sir, it's not my intent to judge your question. I said I cannot answer a political question. I can answer a question about our operations, about what we're doing and what we're responsible for. A question of a political nature is best posed to my minister, who is more than capable and willing to do that.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: All right. Let's continue talking about inmates. Earlier you said you couldn't provide any details inmates. You read a prepared statement.

Do you think that, in disclosing this kind of information, Great Britain and Holland are endangering the security of their troops?

[English]

BGen P. Atkinson: The decisions made by other nations about their policies are theirs to make. The example I'd like to use...and Great Britain is a very good one, but so is the United States. They operate over a large area of Afghanistan. We operate in a specific area. In our specific area we have an interaction with the people, and obviously we have a strong interaction with the Taliban. As I indicated, in that area, if we were to divulge information it could give them advantage and it could affect our intelligence-gathering efforts.

So decisions made by other nations are theirs to make and not for me to speculate on. In our decision to protect our operational security and to protect our operations on the ground, we do not provide details on detainees.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: Earlier you said that Canada had provided Afghan soldiers with 2,500 C7 rifles. Out of 41,000 Afghan soldiers, 2,500 are equipped with C7 rifles. Did I understand correctly?

[English]

BGen P. Atkinson: The 2,500 C7s we provided were to the soldiers, the *kandaks*, who are working with us inside Kandahar.

Mr. Claude Bachand: How many of them are working with you?

BGen P. Atkinson: We have three infantry *kandaks*. Their strength, when they're full up, is around 600 in each, so that would be about 1,800. There are soldiers who are going through the training cycle, because, as I said, I hope we will get a fourth *kandak*. The reason we did this—and we did it in our sector—was so that the soldiers we are working with, whom we are training, are able to use the same equipment and have the confidence to be able to take them on.

So it's focused in our area. The Afghans will complete the distribution of those weapons, but they were distributed to the trained soldiers who are in RC South, and specifically in Kandahar province.

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Bachand: How much ammunition is fired annually in the theatre of operations? I'm asking you this question because the Americans and the British disclose the amount of ammunition fired. Are you going to answer me again that that's an operational secret?

[English]

The Chair: Give a short answer, please, sir.

BGen P. Atkinson: Operational security is something we review on an ongoing basis. I know we received a request for the amount of ammunition we had expended in Afghanistan, and the answer we provided—and let's be clear, it was the answer I provided, because it was me—was that we were holding it back for operational security reasons. We had a sit-down this morning and we reviewed that. We are going to release information on the ammunition expended in Afghanistan on an annual basis. We are prepared to do that. Those figures will be provided through public affairs, I think today.

• (1625)

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

We'll go to the NDP for seven minutes. Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you.

General, thank you very much for the presentation. It was helpful.

The bridges and the causeways are very impressive. It looks like they might be pretty easy, though, to blow up. After you've built them, do you have to actually have 24-hour security assigned to each one?

BGen P. Atkinson: The causeway is a great example. It's actually sitting right in front of a major strongpoint. So the answer is yes.

When something is important to the local Afghans, like the small bridge we put in that you saw there.... It enabled the police and the Afghan National Army to move back and forth so they could protect both their village and the area. That's why we put it in at their request. Any tangible signs, like bridges and causeways, are targets for the Taliban, you're absolutely correct. So building the capacity of the Afghans to protect and be responsible for their own security is where we want to be. That's what we're moving towards. As for the causeway, they would love nothing more than to blow that up. Because of the way it was constructed—it was a causeway as opposed to a bridge—it's a pretty big target. So there's a rather sizeable force sitting right at hand, and we have an interest in that not occurring.

Mr. David Christopherson: But where you don't have that convenience, will the Afghans themselves mount a group to watch?

BGen P. Atkinson: Absolutely. Where we build and help them to do things, there are strongpoints in place. That's why the numbers of Afghan National Police are so important. When a country gets back on its feet, the face it wants to see in its communities is not a soldier, it's a policeman, someone with whom you interact on a daily basis and in whom you have confidence.

I talked about those district coordination centres. That's the 9-1-1 centre. If there's an issue, that's where it comes in. If it's a police issue, then the police take care of it. But they have access to call in the army, because let's face it, Afghanistan is not where they want it to be yet, so the army will be a presence in these communities for some time to come. So yes, absolutely.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you. Great.

Are you expecting another spring offensive?

BGen P. Atkinson: There is almost always a spring offensive of some sort. The winter in Afghanistan is pretty severe. They get a lot of snow, it's cold, and then the rains come and things bog down. So historically, they pull back into the mountains and they regroup. That happens to be the time when we expand our influence as much as we absolutely can and when they try to come back and influence themselves. We like to limit their ability to move. We like to limit their ability to conduct operations, and with each year, as I mentioned earlier, the circle in which they can operate is getting smaller. That's obviously the space we want to be in.

Mr. David Christopherson: Do you have any pressing need right now for any particular materials or equipment that you don't yet have in Kandahar?

BGen P. Atkinson: There's a lot of discussion out there about things we need. One would be medium-lift helicopters, which is no secret. Another is UAVs. The government has programs in place and is working towards that end. Our troops on the ground—there's no doubt about it—are the best-equipped battle group in Afghanistan. But there are enablers that we do need, and those are the two specific ones we're working hard to get. Those capabilities are currently provided by other members of the coalition, but there is a huge stress on those, because they're important and they're in high demand. That's why, obviously, we would like to get those capabilities on the ground to further enhance and improve the ability of our troops to prosecute operations.

Mr. David Christopherson: You mentioned, in answer to another question, that there's a nascent banking system, which means exactly what you meant it to mean, I'm assuming. Does that mean that most things are dealt with in cash, and if so, how much cash? I remember reading an article about the U.S. sending not a briefcase or a suitcase or a brown envelope or even a truck full of cash into Iraq; it was a planeload. There's a whole question of where it all is.

What about Canada? How do we deal with it? Or do we have no need to deal with cash, and the nascent banking system works for us?

BGen P. Atkinson: It is by and large a cash society, but in cities, with commerce as it develops, major work is undertaken. There are contracts. There are banks in Kabul. There are banking machines in Kabul, and there are banking machines in the major cities of Kandahar. We now have a banking machine on our airfield in Kandahar. It was opened up just last year. They are taking the steps towards establishing those things, because obviously taking cash—having other briefcases, truckloads, or planeloads, as you indicated—into a society that is unstable is not a good idea. It is a cash society. It is making progress along those steps, but it's not there yet.

• (1630)

Mr. David Christopherson: Do we have a lot of cash there? Do we take a lot of cash there in whatever currency?

BGen P. Atkinson: We pay for everything, all the contracts we do. I have to think about that for a second. Do we pay for them all? I actually don't know the answer to that, so I'll take that on notice, and I can probably provide a better answer. Otherwise I'm going to stick my nose out, and I'll give you something that's perhaps incorrect. I don't like the thought of soldiers walking around with briefcases of money, even though they have guns.

Mr. David Christopherson: I know it's created all kinds of questions for the Americans in Iraq. There are huge numbers, but it seems to me we might have a smaller version of the same problem. Anything you could answer on that would be appreciated.

This is my last question, if I have time, Mr. Chair, and it looks as though I do.

You mentioned the recruitment of army personnel in Afghanistan. What about recruitment for police, given that they are often targeted, and there seems to be a desire to intimidate locals from having anything to do with that sort of thing. Is that a problem? Is it a problem that's being dealt with? Is it still a challenge that we need to get ahead of? How do you see that one, General?

BGen P. Atkinson: They are recruiting police. The issue is that they started the Afghan National Army over three years ago, and it

has made tremendous progress, but you need more police than you do Afghan National Army. It took two years before they actually started the recruiting of police, so it is slower.

The training of police is not a military function. The EU have a police training mandate. The Americans have taken this on in a big way, and the Germans are helping out, so there are a number of nations helping out. It takes time to develop. Just to use the example of the RCMP in our own country, they have a training system to produce the beat cop on the street, but then there are the investigators and all the people who do the complex.... This takes time. It will take time.

I believe the number I gave you—75,500 personnel—is the strength of the ANP today. We've gone from ground zero to that point over a period of two years, so yes, they are recruiting. Are they there? Absolutely not. When they first started out, the policemen were not equipped with a lot of protection for either vehicle or personal body protection, and consequently they were a soft target. We've done a lot of work in that area to ameliorate that, and we've taught them survival skills, which I commented on in my remarks.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thanks, Chair.

The Chair: We'll finish up with the government side.

Ms. Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will be sharing my time with Mr. Hawn.

General, how do you see the process of including the 3,200 U.S. Marine Corps troops and their helicopter assets that you mentioned into the operations in the south under the command of Major-General Lessard?

BGen P. Atkinson: Very clearly this is an asset that will be at his disposal. Remember, he is the NATO commander in Regional Command South, and this is 25% more combat power. To talk specifically about how they are going to be used—now we're entering into the realm of operations—all I can say is that brings an awful lot of combat power to the table. I know that NATO welcomes it, we certainly welcome it, and I anticipate that in this campaign season the Taliban will notice it as well.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: After the season, how many of these 3,200 are expected to remain?

BGen P. Atkinson: That's a national decision the U.S. will make. Currently they have said they'll be coming for seven months, and they will be working with Commander ISAF, General McNeill, and ultimately General McKiernan when he takes over. They have announced that they are coming for seven months, and then we'll see what comes.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: You mentioned several methods used by the insurgents—IEDs and executions—that indicate a tone of desperation on their part. You did mention propaganda, and that soldiers returning from Afghanistan have been expressing their frustrations over the misinformation that insurgents successfully infiltrate western and North American media with. The insurgents want ISAF forces out so they can once again take over the government and enslave the Afghans into servitude and the drug trade.

Would you please elaborate on the ways and the kinds of things the insurgents do and use in North American communications to sway public opinion away from North Americans fighting the war on terror in Afghanistan?

• (1635)

BGen P. Atkinson: That's a very complex question. I can answer part of it.

First of all, they are masters at information operations. Just because we are sitting inside the middle of Afghanistan, in the mountains, the desert, in areas where you could argue there is very little communications, there is cellular technology. They have access to the Internet through satellites. When there's a story printed in the *Ottawa Citizen* today, it's being read. If it's on the BBC News or somewhere else, they have it.

They know how to plant false stories and everything else. Their ability to react to things on the ground is something that is very practised. They have used it against us. It's something we combat and work on. It's called information operations. We do it to them; they do it to us.

In the military, there's a thing called the OODA loop. The OODA loop is trying to get inside the decision cycle of your opponent and stay one step ahead of him. We try to do this all the time.

As I said, through information operations they use everything at their disposal. They can make an allegation that we have bombed a mosque or shot civilians or done something. We have to then go and defend it. And it depends on how it is reported. They will use everything at their disposal to get into the Afghan news cycle, the international cycle. You can assume they have anything that is printed or reported, and they will attempt to use it to their advantage.

It's very complex, and it's something we work very hard at. It's something they are masters of. We want to be masters. We're not quite there yet, but we work on this all the time.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: So part of the call for Canadian troops to return from Afghanistan is perhaps a result of this successful communications war by the Taliban. We're falling for it.

BGen P. Atkinson: I would say yes.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Lunney.

Mr. James Lunney (Nanaimo—Alberni, CPC): Thank you very much.

Brigadier-General, it's great to hear about progress on the ground with bridges and infrastructure and also training with the Afghan National Army and police forces.

I want to pick up on the comment about the 3,200 marine forces. I think there was reference to helicopters being part of the equipment they may bring with them. I wonder if you could comment on that.

The second part is that the Manley report recommended a further 1,000 NATO troops and equipment. I wonder if you could comment on the assets that these additional forces and equipment would bring to our forces on the ground in terms of security and safety.

BGen P. Atkinson: The marine unit that is coming is a self-contained combat and combat support unit. They have their own helicopters, guns, and all the equipment they need. When they're operating as a part of the coalition, there will be an integration of assets. As I said, adding 25% of combat power in Regional Command South will make a huge difference.

The Manley report from the blue ribbon panel was reported to the government. I know the ministers are going to Vilnius this evening with the other NATO ministers. This will be an issue that will be discussed. The political part is working hard with our other NATO partners to get that.

There's no secret that we want a 1,000-man battle group in our area. I said we wanted additional Afghan forces. The call has been consistent to have another battle command in the south. That's important. It would make a difference on the ground, as we will see with the U.S. Marines when they come in the spring.

Mr. James Lunney: Do I have any time left?

The Chair: You have 40 seconds.

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): I have a quick question.

I spent Christmas looking at the Arghandab causeway, and I spent the next day speaking to a combat engineer in Mas'um Ghar. He talked about the development projects they are putting the Afghans on. His point was that the more they do, the more they take ownership, and the more, frankly, p.o.'d they're going to be if the Taliban come in and blow something up. How important is it that they take ownership and control of those facilities?

• (1640)

BGen P. Atkinson: This comes back to my comments earlier.

Taking ownership of their country and responsibility for their own security is the space we want to help them get to. Our success is their success. And our success is in helping them get there.

The local people are sick and tired. You saw it in the poll of all the violence that's overtaken them all these years. They want their kids to go to school. They want to have a life where they don't need to worry about getting blown up. They are taking responsibility. They're reporting corruption. They are telling us where IEDs have been placed in the ground, and they're telling us who the Taliban are. The night letters the Taliban send go both ways, and we get the reports about where the bad guys are. They are taking responsibility for their country. It's only through this that we will achieve the long-term success they want and need.

Mr. Laurie Hawn: By the way, it was a U.S. Air Force fighter pilot who came up with the OODA loop, if you recall.

The Chair: We have confirmation of the correct spelling and what it means from Mr. Cox. We can give it to people to make sure it gets into the transcript correctly.

Thank you for that.

Before we go I have one question, if the committee will allow me. Are the IEDs put out by the Taliban strictly to target the military or to terrorize everybody?

BGen P. Atkinson: They have two targets. We are a visible target to them, but they want to cause instability. Some IEDs are command-controlled, so you can actually pick the target you want to harm, but

a lot of them are indiscriminate. That's why we see civilian trucks, busloads of children, and other people getting killed by IEDs. If you're going to explode a vehicle full of explosives in downtown Kandahar, you're not just going to take out your military target. Invariably it is the locals—the civilians, children, people in the market and the stores—who end up being targeted. So an IED by its nature is indiscriminate and causes terror and instability. That's what they're all about.

The Chair: If an IED explodes, regardless of the target or the result, are you notified? Is that all calculated?

BGen P. Atkinson: We have a pretty good handle on everything that happens around the country. The short answer is yes. Working with the Afghan national security forces and in concert with them, we track where they all are, the trends, and everything else so we can continue to combat this in a very effective way through our intelligence-led operations.

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir.

Thank you for your presentation. We look forward to the next one. We'll suspend for a few minutes while we go in camera to deal with committee business.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

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